A Reply to H. E. K.

Some Reflections on Beauty For the New Year

By Royal Cortissoz

My Dear Krehbiel: Your delightful letter addressed to me in The Tribune of last Sunday on the bewilderments of the stage settings at the opera house requires, you say, no answer, but you ask for sympathy and think that possibly some of our readers may share in the interest which we both have in this subject. Moreover, through the sad, disillusionising experiences of which you speak you preserve intact a certain delicately mischievous sense of humor. Confess now, was it not with something like a chuckle that you hailed your remarks to a man headed, as you perfectly well knew, only a few days before, toward a performance of "Tristan" illumined by Mr. Urban's magical touch? A fellow feeling surely makes us wondrous kind. In this case it urges me to be sympathetically articulate.

I wrote to you about that extraordinary set last winter. Mercifully I had forgotten all about it and unmercifully it revealed itself again with only the more painful effect after a year's oblivion. The afterdeck in the first act might have been extracted from a saga, but the doodads amidships, where the action goes on, still smote my eyes as with the exotic garishness of an oriental bazaar. The beetling tenement in the second act still resembles a modern house of the skyscraping order, and in the last act I was reminded once more of the kind of masonry affected by our railroad engineers. It was, indeed, as though time had stood still and I was back at my initiation into this latter-day version of a classic. Mme. Matzenauer, like Mme. Easton before her, was nothing if not the radiant prima donna — where our beloved Lilli Lehman, so many years ago, was content to be Isolde.

And then you talk of intercession with the gods! How shall I respond, I who have also been in this stony, arid arcadia and have winced as you have winced? You ask for sympathy, for comfort. Well, when you are hurt there is comfort, sometimes, in examining into what hurt you. I have been doing this for years, ever since the comic incongruities and crudities of which you speak came into my view, trying to find out what it was that hurt. I have concluded that it was the tendency of the stage designer to see differently rather than to see beautifully. There was, let us admit, a certain amount of excess upholstery about the sets with which Daly and Henry Irving used to fill the eye. In the reaction against it a quantity of furniture was bound to be thrown overboard — though I wonder how many of us would assert, hand on heart, that it really destroyed the illusion sought by those astute builders of theatrical pictures. Still, the surplusage had to go, I never mourned it. But I thought I perceived only a doubtful substitute for it in the elaborately organized simplicity which began with Gordon Craig.

You can't get simplicity, the kind of simplicity that is beautiful, by taking thought. It must arise from the central spring of your inspiration and be a habit of mind; it is of the soul of things, not of their dress. Landor has a word for the literary man here which is equally apposite for the artist. "Never try to say things admirably," he observes; "try only to say them plainly." The new school of "simplicity" never went in for saying things plainly; it strove more often to be admirable, different, new. There has been for me a kind of morbid fascination about the numerous models for stage settings I have seen. Nominally they have over and over again plumped for simplicity, with a great play of tremendously emphasized horizontal and vertical lines. Actually they have been labored, self-conscious to the last degree. And yet if you are looking for comfort, there is a little to be found in the occasional success of this very school. There have been times in its search for the admirable, the different, the new, when it has hit felicitously upon all three.

I remember when Granville Barker was producing some plays in New York he invited me to see a few of them and I studied especially their scenery. There was a piece, "The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife," with an investiture possessing a charm that still lingers in my memory. It was designed, I think, by Mr. Robert Edmond Jones, who keeps the dramatic critics so busy, now lifting them to Elysium and now bowling them as low as to the fiends. He was perfect in that piece. He knew all about the simplicity dodge, but he didn't handle it like a conjurer taking a rabbit out of a hat. On the contrary, the skillful arrangement of line which marked his design was the most natural thing in the world; it just happened, arising out of the genius of the little play. Illusion was there. Shortly afterwards Barker made a production of "Midsummer Night's Dream" in which the slimy loveliness of that drama was torn and tattered as by bungling hands. What was the cause of the difference between the attacks made upon the two problems? One was seen beautifully, the other was not.

I am not tantalizing you with a phrase, Krehbiel. I am referring you to a fact. Come over to my bailiwick and see. Observe the Italians of the Renaissance. They saw life beautifully, exquisitely. You feel it in the draftsmanship of one of Leonardo's cartoons of a hideous peasant as vividly as you feel it in a Madonna by Raphael. Subject has nothing to do with it. In eighteenth century France, Chardin saw a scullery maid as beautifully as Watteau saw the frou-frou of courtliness he embarked for enchanted Cytherea. Look at Rembrandt, who, as Whistler said, "saw picturesque grandeur and noble dignity in the Jews' quarter of Amsterdam, and lamented not that its inhabitants were not Greeks." There is nothing in the Metropolitan Museum more beautiful than Rembrandt's "Old Woman Cutting Her Nails," a disgusting subject made sublime because he saw it beautifully. There is nothing to be formulated about this process. One must simply attribute it to the creative impulse of the true artist, transmogrifying what he touches. In the glow and action of his genius he sees and feels with a supernatural intensity and the rapture of his vision passes into what he does. It thus operates in all the arts. With patience and humility I read a book like "Babbitt," wondering what all the fuss is about. What distresses me is not the genial Babbitt himself. I am willing to swallow him whole, willing to believe that the country is fairly slopping over with Babbitts. It is the author, as artist, who beats me. He records his facts with the aesthetic emotion of a man compiling a telephone book. Think of what Balzac would have done with it, Balzac describing a moldy wall until you feel that Ver Meer might have painted it! Balzac sees beautifully.

I've been looking at a bundle of photographs from the scenery painted not long ago for "The Ring" at the Prinzregenten Theater in Munich. Lothar Weber painted it after designs by Leo Pasetti and Adolph Linnebach. Studied side by side with photographs of the old scenes, some of these recent effects seem amazing improvements. They give you symbolical line and mass in place of old-fashioned florid realism. Color, I am told by the friend who lends me the photographs, does not count nearly as much as form, and often gauze curtains are used still further to mitigate the tone. The lighting, as is inevitable nowadays, counts enormously. I infer that if the scenes come off it is because the simplicity in them is not too self-consciously organized, and illusion is created in terms harmonious with the character of the drama. In poetry, we are told, the illusion is everything. Is it not so on the stage? That was the great source of Monroe Hewlett's success when he made the scenes for "Iphigenia" at the Metropolitan in 1916. Don't you remember the Homeric background he gave us for the first act and the temple scene in the second, how faithful they were to the spirit of "Iphigenia"—and of Gluck? His scenery didn't fence in the action, it sympathetically enveloped it. I don't know or care whether Hewlett turned archæologist or not for that enterprise—toward which, as I understand, Mr. Otto Kahn and Mr. Gatti-Casazza bent their energies with a view to the encouragement of American art in the theater. I only know that the problem was beautifully seen.

Isn't there consolation in the episode? The opera house has its happy moments. Set the "Iphigenia" against the huge bonded warehouse of stone which was erected on the stage when Mahler took "Fidelio" in hand. Set the delightfully picturesque "Boris" against the deplorable "Tristan." And set against all the discouraging things the profound truth that beauty sooner or later has its way. Says Andrew Lang:

> There stand two vessels by the golden throne of Zeus, on high,
> From these he scatters mirth and scatters moan to men that die.

Take the mirth and let the moan go. The tawdriest of settings passes at long last to the scrapheap. Whistler knew, and I must quote him again: "We have then but to wait—until, with the mark of the gods upon him—there comes among us again the chosen who shall continue what has gone before. Satisfied that, even were he never to appear, the story of the beautiful is already complete—hewn in the marbles of the Parthenon—and broidered, with the birds, upon the fan of Hokusai—at the foot of Fusiyama."

Who shall continue what has gone before! I love that saying. In art there is, spiritually speaking, no such thing as the past. Chronology is largely a matter of conversational convenience. The masterpieces of antiquity are preserved, immobile, in the rooms of a museum, with dates over the door, but it is a mistake to think of them as held, in time, in a kind of atrophy within airless, water-tight compartments. They are, rather, like the waves of the sea, that only seem to die as they go on endlessly reproducing themselves, responsive to some ground swell of divine energy come straight from Olympus. What a dateless thing is beauty!

I felt this conviction anew the other day when I went to Duveen's and saw some marvellous old Italian portraits. There was a curious young bulbous-browed prince by Pisanello, his impertinent nose tilted against a background of pure color. His prim shoulders were swathed in blue and gold. He was a little absurd and altogether magnificent—Pisanello had seen him so beautifully. Then there was the portrait of a boy by Boltraffio, as realistic as though it had been painted in the modern world, but fairly tremulous with the sweetness of the Leonardesque traditions. Finally, came a relief in gray marble by Desiderio da Settignano, the portrait of some Florentine lady of the fifteenth century. It is a supreme jewel. The profile is angelically drawn. The face and throat are modeled in a way to make the modulations of Rodin seem mere superficial virtuosity. The highest quality of design is in the hair and drapery, not a touch without its subtle eloquence. Musing before it, I realized this dateless, ever-living beauty which I commend to you for comfort. It is not a remote, metaphysical thing. It is as poignantly direct in its touch upon one's consciousness as the taste of cold water on a burning day. It sprang into existence under Desiderio's fingers nearly five hundred years ago, and you apprehend it in a room at Duveen's to-day in all its tingling freshness. What a portentous vitality it has! How actively it counts in the great stream of beauty that, with the priestlike waters of Keats, keeps up the task of "pure ablution 'round earth's human shores." Says Cleopatra:

> Bring me my robe, put on my crown,
> I have immortal longings in me.

The words might have been uttered for all mankind. Our immortal longings are imperious and in the long run they are satisfied. Beauty is an element, and we must breathe it, like air, else we perish. "Art," said Blake, "is a means of conversing with Paradise." And, since art never dies, why worry about the passing vagaries of the tactless, egotistic scene painter? You have, too, you of all men, a resource on which, in your letter, you touch yourself, when you allude to the old days in which we let the music warm our imaginations to such a point that we forgot or ignored the exasperation latent in a stage setting. Apropos, Mr. Louis N. Parker, the playwright, whose experience peculiarly qualifies him, has lately supplied some comfort for you which I may cite.

After thirty years of devout attendance upon the performances at Bayreuth he has been looking back upon them in cold blood, asking and answering, in "The Golden Hind," some pointed questions. Were those performances ideal, were poem, music, scenery, singing, acting, really so blended as to form a single composite art, as they claimed to be? Alas! he replies, they were not. Could the text be heard better at Bayreuth than elsewhere? No. Were the performers ideal? No. Was the scenery always right? No. He tries to be charitable about the personalities of the singers. "They were as God and a generous diet had made them." He speaks of "Podgy Parsifals, perspiring Tristans, globular Iseults, matronly Brunhilds." You see, he, too, has needed comfort. But for him, as for you, the music remains:

"Wagner was first and last, and continuously, the greatest dramatic composer the world has yet seen. He was so great a dramatic music maker that his music stands as dramatic music without the aid of the drama. Knock all the scaffolding away, take away the stage, the actors, the scenery, even the words, and the music remains, the finest expression of drama. The most perfect performance of Wagner to which you can treat yourself is to read a full score by the side of your hearth; the next best is to listen to a magnificent orchestra without any stage accessories. . . . What magic lantern can add to the effect of the 'Ride of the Valkyries'? What need of silk ribbon fluttering to an electric fan to intensify Brunhild's 'Ring of Fire'? . . . That, I think, is what remains of Wagner, and will remain: music—extraordinarily eloquent, amazingly pictorial, sometimes terrible, sometimes overwhelmingly lovely, always great."

There you have your comfort, heaped up and running over. For the rest, when scene painters nevertheless annoy, there is nothing like the thought of their impermanence, nothing like holding fast to the gospel of beauty and "conversing with paradise." Reading the poets is sustaining. So is Plato. You will recall Dr. Johnson and the country squire whom he interrogated as to his philosophical studies. They were progressing very well, but, somehow, "cheerfulness was always breaking in." Plato is your man when you cannot away with the vagaries of the opera house. He brings both wisdom and cheerfulness. When he contemplates his "vast sea of beauty" he gives you a comfort that shall wipe out the last stain of impossible growths in the Theban desert or of your "vernal zephyr," behaving in "Die Walküre" like a charge of dynamite. That is a glorious passage in the "Symposium," in which Socrates, reporting the words of the sibyl of Mantineia, rises through the graduations of beauty as in some impassioned dithyramb until he reaches the highest inspiration of all. He concludes:

"This is that life above all others which man should live, in the contemplation of beauty absolute; a beauty which if you once beheld, you would see not to be after the measure of gold and garments and fair boys and youths, whose presence now entrances you; and you and many a one would be content to live, seeing them only and conversing with them without meat or drink, if that were possible—you only want to look at them and be with them. But what if man had eyes to see the true beauty — the divine beauty, I mean, pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality and all the colors and vanities of human life — thither looking, and holding converse with the true beauty simple and divine? Remember how in that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be able to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities (for he has hold not of an image but of a reality), and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may. Would that be an ignoble life?"

He talks of "beauty absolute, separate, simple and everlasting, which without diminution and without increase, or any change, is imparted to the ever-growing and perishing beauties of all other things." Even stage settings, I would dare swear. Why not? It is a tall order, to be sure, for the busy designers of operatic scenery in a world full of jazz. But you asked for comfort and I protest that it is there. Wait in patience, with Whistler, for the advent of "the chosen." Emerson knew what he was talking about. When half-gods go, the gods arrive, and the half-gods always wear out their welcome. All that you need to do meanwhile is to enter your ivory tower, lock the door and throw away the key. You need not fear that while sympathy, imagination and humor endure you will miss anything vital that goes on in the surrounding plain. Remember, from the top of the tower one may, perhaps, glimpse "the chosen" as he comes above the horizon. It is the critic's job, thus to watch, and his joy.

A Florentine Lady

(From the relief by Desiderio da Settignano at the Duveen Gallery)

The Spanish Interior

A Book About Its Design and Its Furniture

We touched briefly not long ago upon the first portfolio in a series published by William Helburn under the title of "Spanish Interiors and Furniture." The work is now complete and makes a compendium of the deepest interest for the student and the collector. The photographs and drawings in this collection of 200 superbly printed plates were made by Arthur Byne. The brief text is written by Mildred Stapley. These happy collaborators have placed us in their debt before, through their books on Spanish architecture, ironwork and decorated wooden ceilings. In the present pages they round out a really invaluable service, covering, as in their earlier publications, unfamiliar ground and documenting it with scholarly thoroughness.

The early Spanish interior is never more Spanish than when it is Moorish. The influence of the Moorish craftsman persisted long after the expulsion of the Moors. His most characteristic contribution to the subject was the polychrome tiling which, as the introduction shrewdly notes, was an ideal building material in a hot, insect-ridden country. It was employed not only in walls but in staircases. Plasterwork was used, as well as tiling, for ornamental purposes, but stress is laid upon the Spanish room as an essentially simple structure. "Great spaces of white wall were appreciated for their decorative contrast to the occasional hangings. Of these there were a great variety—Flemish tapestries, leathers from Cordova, local weavings in the Moorish tradition as well as rich damasks and velvets. Every family has a repostero on a large scale—the family blazon in applique on a coarse yellow felt background, or embroidered on velvet. . . . Movable furniture was scant."

The parsimony of the Spanish in the matter of furniture is partly explained by social conditions—which were not precisely social, and, in fact, have only in more modern times approximated to European habit elsewhere. Spain has never been a country for intimate visiting from house to house. We are told the rueful comment of an aristocrat of our own time on what he could not but regard as a moral deterioration. "When I was young," he said, "it was considered extravagant hospitality to offer a cup of chocolate to the priest the day he came to confess the family; but now! it is offered to any sort of visitor and on any occasion!" Certain objects that have been matters of course for centuries elsewhere in the world have been strangely neglected in Spain. The bureau with drawers, for example, has never been popular. For clothes and linen the Spaniard has always preferred the chest. In their careful sifting of the subject the authors concentrate on these articles of furniture, and on tables, chairs, benches, beds and the highly characteristic vargueno, or cabinet. The last-mentioned piece is described as the prominent achievement of the Castilian artisan.

American collectors know it pretty well. Whenever old Spanish furniture is sold here a vargueno or two may be counted upon to turn up, a handsomely picturesque affair which has answered "the double purpose of desk and cabinet." It is a cupboard raised to a higher power. It is figured in this book as unique, both inside and out, often prodigiously ingenious and complicated in detail and always richly decorative. Both in picture and in text the authors give so charming an account of Spanish furniture that it is a little disconcerting to find them disagreeing with the high commendation that has been bestowed in some quarters upon the Spanish workman. The point is candidly put:

"Early pieces are as solidly and honestly built as those of other countries, but with even less nicety of craftsmanship. In the same piece that shows neat dovetail and mortise-and-tenon joinery may be seen the most brutal use of long nails. In fact, as proof of how durability was esteemed paramount to finish, might be quoted the municipal order of Granada (published by Leonard Williams) to the effect that 'The four nails which fasten the seat of the chair to the legs must traverse the frame completely and be hammered back upon the other side, unless the surface be inlaid, in which case they need not pass completely through.' In more than chairs the maker seems to have taken pride in using big nails and clinching them visibly on the reverse side. In short, Spanish furniture during two centuries and a half was crude, in the sense that the oak period of England was crude, and this quality in each case gives personality. . . . No, fine craftsmanship and general elegance are not the salient qualities of Spanish furniture; but on the other hand it has its own assertive, racial character — a compound of simplicity, strength and seriousness."

Allusion is made to the vitality of a tradition which makes every housemaid an adept in the care of old furniture, so that even unpretentious pieces have a perfect patine. This counts even in the illustrations, in which one can discern something of the rich romantic bloom lying upon the examples given. Beauty of design is not often apparent. Spanish furniture, the authors point out, was not architecturalized, like the Italian. It rarely rejoices your soul with a good molding. But the epithets applied to it above are well advised. It has decidedly simplicity, strength and seriousness, and we might add the dignity that goes with generous scale and good proportion. Its virtues are amply set forth in this book, for all that the authors are so wisely discriminative. Spanish furniture, thanks to their intervention, will be better understood in America and better liked. This is one of the timeliest books that could be imagined. It comes just when the collecting of furniture is at its height with us and pours a flood of light, gives an abundance of practical aid where light and aid are needed.

Water Colors

Two Societies at the Fine Arts Building

The American Water Color Society and the New York Water Color Club, combining forces at the Fine Arts Building, organize one of those big miscellaneous exhibitions of which it is fair to say that they might be better and they might be worse. This might be better in that it might yield a little more excitement through the inclusion of some really brilliant pieces. Water color is a medium for a master, and there is no master here, no painter detaching himself from the mass. On the other hand, the walls are rich in work that, if less than masterly, is nevertheless well done. There are clever drawings everywhere, especially among the open-air studies. A. Schille, Felicie Waldo Howell, Sandor Bernath, George Wharton Edwards, George Elmer Brown, Chauncey F. Ryder, W. E. Heitland and Julius Delbos are conspicuous among the more exhilarating contributors. Mr. Bernath is perhaps the leading figure of them all. His water colors are charming things, done with a capital touch. There are good examples of still life and flower painting. Adele Williams and Anna Fisher make themselves felt in this category. The figure subjects are not impressive, though here and there are interesting episodes, such as the poetized scenes of Charles Austin Needham, the skillful decorative arrangements of Hal Burrows, the slightly modernistic but still amusing sketches of Jane Poupelet and the sprightly portraits by Hilda Belcher. The average in vivacity and deftness, two elements indispensable in water color, is high.

The New Society of Artists, now in the fourth year of its existence, will open its annual exhibition at the Anderson Galleries on Wednesday. With greater space at its disposal than has hitherto been available, the society is said to have put forth special efforts to assemble a good collection of paintings and sculptures.

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